



## **FLATHEAD RIVER DRAINAGE**

### **PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION**

The Flathead River drainage includes Flathead Lake, the Flathead River and its tributaries, including the North Fork and Middle Fork of the Flathead River (the South Fork of the Flathead is not included in this management area), the Whitefish River drainage, the Stillwater River drainage and the numerous small drainages on the westside of the Flathead Valley, draining over 7,000 square miles. The North Fork of the Flathead River begins in British Columbia, Canada and the Middle Fork in the Great Bear and Bob Marshall Wilderness areas of the Flathead National Forest. Glacier National Park lies between the two forks. Flathead Lake is bisected by the northern boundary of the Flathead Indian Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. This management area is located in Flathead and Lake Counties. The Flathead watershed includes 10,000-foot peaks in the headwaters and heavily forested slopes, agricultural lands and wetlands on the valley floor.

There are 183 lakes in the drainage, totaling 156,966 surface acres. Numerous large lakes exist in the drainage, including Flathead Lake, Whitefish Lake, Upper and Lower Stillwater Lakes, Tally Lake, Ashley Lake, Little Bitterroot Lake, Hubbart Reservoir, Lake Mary Ronan, Lake Blaine, Echo Lake and many small valley and mountain lakes of less than 350 surface acres. There are three general types of lake settings that provide a wide diversity of fishing opportunity. There are high elevation alpine lakes that are ice free for less than half of the year that provide summer trout fishing. There are moderate elevation mountain setting lakes that are accessible most of the year providing a mix of fish species and opportunity. And there are valley floor lakes that are very accessible and provide opportunity for both warm and cold water fish species.

### **FISHERIES MANAGEMENT**

Flathead Lake is the most popular fishery in the drainage and one of the top ten water bodies for fishing effort in Montana. Flathead Lake is large at about 123,000 surface acres. The lake's outstanding natural resources and diversity of recreational opportunities, combined with its proximity to Kalispell, Polson and Missoula, contribute to its popularity. It is a destination vacation site for Canadian and other out-of-state visitors.

Flathead Lake and river are managed as a wild trout fishery, emphasizing natural reproduction and native fish. Fishing regulations across the drainage are very restrictive for native species and very liberal for harvest of non-native fish species. The basin is also the focus of native fish recovery efforts. Flathead Lake is home to eleven native fish species including bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, mountain and pygmy whitefish, northern pike minnow, peamouth, longnose and largescale sucker, reidside shiner, and two species of sculpin. Twelve non-native fish species inhabit the Flathead including lake trout, lake whitefish, brook trout, rainbow trout, northern pike, brook stickleback, black bullhead, largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappie and yellow perch. Dominant fish species vary from westslope cutthroat, bull trout and brook trout in the headwaters, to a mixture of warm and cold water species at lower elevations. Angling on Flathead Lake occurs year-round and is most popular in the early spring, summer and fall. Lake trout, lake whitefish and yellow perch comprise the majority of the catch. Winter ice fishing occurs annually on bays as ice allows.

The Flathead River is the most popular stream fishery in the drainage. The mainstem reach on the valley floor upstream of the lake is the most popular section providing summer fishing for westslope cutthroat trout and a fall run of lake whitefish. The connected sloughs near Flathead Lake provide a mixed fishery primarily for warm water species. The North and Middle forks of the Flathead River provide diverse recreational activities and popular westslope cutthroat trout fishing.

Bull trout exhibit two life forms, with adults residing in a lake (adfluvial) or river (fluvial) and spawning in upstream tributaries. Juveniles rear in the tributaries for one to three years before migrating to adult habitats downstream. Fish move freely throughout the entire Flathead system, including all major river tributaries and lakes. The one exception is Hungry Horse Dam which cut off about 40% of the Flathead drainage. The dam prevents Flathead Lake bull trout from migrating into the South Fork of the Flathead River; Hungry Horse Reservoir now takes the place of Flathead Lake for that part of the population's life cycle. The North and Middle forks provide spawning and rearing habitat for the Flathead Lake and River population. There are other bull trout populations in other lakes and tributary systems including Whitefish Lake, Upper Stillwater Lake, Cyclone and Frozen Lakes, and lakes in Glacier National Park. Fishing regulations are very restrictive for bull trout in the Flathead drainage, where fishing for bull trout is not allowed. Major spawning tributaries (Big, Coal, Whale, Trail, Granite, Lodgepole, Morrison, and Long creeks) are closed all year to fishing. In addition, special fishing restrictions (stream mouth closures) exist on some spawning streams to protect spawning bull trout.

The larger lakes in the area contain valuable mixed non-native recreational fisheries. Ashley Lake, Little Bitterroot Lake and Lake Mary Ronan primarily provide popular kokanee salmon fisheries during both summer and winter months. Lake Mary Ronan is the kokanee egg source for the State hatchery stocking program. Echo Lake and Lake Blaine provide popular largemouth bass fisheries. With the exception of Lake Mary Ronan kokanee, these are wild self-sustaining fish populations.

Numerous small mid-elevation lakes are stocked with westslope cutthroat trout, rainbow trout or Arctic grayling providing popular put-and-grow fisheries. Lakes are stocked on a one to four year rotation to maximize fish growth or catch rates. Four family fishing ponds in the valley are heavily stocked with catchable size trout and provide many thousands of days of angling. High mountain lakes are stocked with westslope cutthroat trout.

## **HABITAT**

Water quality is very important to Flathead Valley residents. At this time, water quality in the Flathead Lake and river system is very good, providing for drinking and municipal uses, swimming and recreation, growth and propagation of fish and associated aquatic life, and as an agricultural and industrial water supply. FWP works to protect high water quality in many ways. FWP provides input to the permitting process for a number of stream protection laws (SPA, 310) in an effort to minimize impacts and water degradation associated with human development. Biologists administer over a hundred such permits a year in the Flathead drainage.

In the North Fork of the Flathead River drainage there are a number of large coal deposits. Over the last four decades, there has been exploration of mining reserves and attempts to begin open-pit coal mining--activities that threaten water quality in the river and Flathead Lake. A recent

cooperative effort between British Columbia, Montana and numerous government agencies and non-governmental groups resulted in a prohibition to mining in the North Fork of the Flathead River. This prevents future degradation of water quality and fish habitat from coal mining and other resource development.

The USFS and FWP have completed stream habitat restoration improvements in bull trout spawning and rearing habitat. For example, large trees have been added to several miles of Hallowat and Coal creeks to provide complex habitat to impacted stream reaches. These and other projects will improve bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout habitat in these streams.

Recent and ongoing land acquisitions in the Flathead drainage are designed to protect both terrestrial and aquatic species. Important bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout habitat are on these lands. FWP and partners have completed numerous private land conservation easements along the Flathead River, protecting miles of stream bank and many acres of riparian vegetation. This activity will help protect water quality in the Flathead drainage and important habitat and migratory routes for fish and wildlife.

The Bonneville Power Administration is required to mitigate for the construction and operation of Hungry Horse Dam on the South Fork of the Flathead River, and accomplishes much of this by funding the FWP mitigation program. In 1995, FWP, the Bonneville Power Administration and the BOR constructed a selective withdrawal structure on the dam. This structure pulls water from various depth levels in the reservoir to provide natural water temperatures to the Flathead River downstream. Prior to construction the dam released cold water from the bottom of the reservoir that significantly reduced stream temperatures in the Flathead River for 49 miles downstream. Restoring natural temperatures improved conditions for fish and aquatic insects. This group of agencies also implemented a dam water release strategy to more closely mimic the natural river annual flow regime. The dam is now operated to not only provide flood protection and energy production but also maintain flows in the river downstream similar to those prior to dam construction.

## **FISHING ACCESS**

There are more than 14 publicly owned or managed access sites along the Flathead River downstream of the confluence of the North and Middle forks. There are more than 15 publicly owned or managed access sites along the North and Middle forks. There are more than 20 publicly owned or managed access sites and six privately owned access sites along Flathead Lake. Some access sites are located near local communities and, in addition to river access, provide convenient land-based recreation opportunities. Most of the river and lake access points provide boat launching opportunities, docks, bathroom facilities and parking. FWP will continue to pursue opportunities to increase access on popular water bodies, such as Flathead Lake and Whitefish Lake, where user numbers are increasing to levels above the capacity of existing sites and on water bodies where no public access currently exists such as Lake Blaine.

## **SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

### *Flathead Lake and River Fisheries Co-Management Plan*

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks share fisheries management authority on Flathead Lake and River. In 2000, the two co-managers

completed a fisheries management plan with goals to protect native fish by reducing non-native fish with an emphasis on sport harvest, provide recreational angling, and protect high water quality in the watershed. The management plan expired in 2010 but continues to guide management activities. CSKT is currently preparing an EIS to explore additional means to reduce lake trout abundance and increase native fish abundance. Co-managers will continue to manage fisheries and develop management plans in the future.

#### *Westslope Cutthroat Hybridization*

Pure westslope cutthroat populations within the interconnected Flathead drainage are threatened by hybridization with rainbow trout. Hybrids have shown both increased abundance and distribution in recent decades. FWP is investigating methods to prevent rainbows and hybrids from spawning, remove hybrids as feasible and to change fishing regulations to allow and even encourage anglers to harvest hybrid trout.

#### *Illegal Fish Introductions*

Illegal fish introductions are a continuing problem in Montana with more than half of the documented 600+ introductions occurring in northwest Montana. Illegal introductions impact both native and recreational fisheries, reduce fishing opportunity and increase management costs. As a disincentive to further illegal introductions, fishery managers will look to potential alternatives such as to either prohibit harvest on panfish or not provide management such as fishing limits on game fish such as pike, bass and walleye in selected waters, depending on the situation and species involved.

## Fisheries Management Direction for Flathead River Drainage

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Flathead River - Headwaters downstream to confluence with Flathead Lake including the North and Middle Forks, and Sloughs	198 Miles	Bull trout	Wild	Conservation	Continue yearlong angling closures for all fish on primary bull trout spawning streams and closure on angling for bull trout in the Flathead River and Forks.
		Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations	Eliminate harvest and maintain or expand populations for conservation and catch and release westslope cutthroat angling. Consider isolation of westslope cutthroat populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat is sufficient to allow persistence.
		Mountain whitefish	Wild	General	Maintain numbers. Begin to understand population size and trend.
		Lake whitefish, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Lake trout, Brook trout, Rainbow trout, Black crappie	Wild	General/ Suppression	Provide angling harvest opportunity to reduce numbers to help meet native species goals. Investigate removal of rainbow-cutthroat trout hybrids and rainbow trout to reduce future hybridization. Consider closing harvest on illegally introduced panfish in some waters to remove incentive for further illegal introductions.
Habitat needs and activities: Restore habitat to favor native bull trout, WCT and mountain whitefish in headwater stream reaches.					
Whitefish River, Stillwater River, Ashley Creek and Tributaries	23 miles 75 miles 47 miles plus Tributaries	Bull trout,  Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild  Wild	Conservation  Conservation/ General	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout.  Maintain or expand populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Consider isolation of WCT populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat is sufficient to allow persistence. Provide angling opportunity including harvest for westslope cutthroat trout where possible.
Continued on next page		Rainbow trout, Brook trout, Northern pike	Wild	General	Maintain current levels of angling harvest



Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
		Mountain whitefish	Wild	General	Maintain numbers. Begin to understand population size and trend.
Habitat needs and activities: Continue to manage connectivity to favor native fishes.					
Whitefish Lake, Tally Lake, Upper Stillwater Lake, Lower Stillwater Lake	3,315 acres,	Bull trout	Wild	Conservation	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout.
	1,211 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ General	Maintain or expand populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Consider isolation of WCT populations if hybridization is a threat and habitat is sufficient to allow persistence. Provide angling opportunity including harvest for westslope cutthroat trout where possible.
	592 acres,				
	252 acres	Lake trout, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Rainbow trout, Lake whitefish	Wild	General/Special Regulations	Provide angling harvest opportunity.
Little Bitterroot Lake, Ashley Lake	2,970 acres	Kokanee	Wild	Special Regulations	Evaluate harvest limits to increase the average size at harvest without noticeable reducing catch rates. Maintain kokanee egg-taking in Little Bitterroot Lake and limits to maintain over-size kokanee.
	2,850 acres	Rainbow trout, Rainbow x cutthroat trout hybrid, Westslope cutthroat trout	Hatchery/ Wild	Put-Grow-Take/ Quality	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to produce trophy size fish and improved angler catch rates. Continue stocking triploid Gerrard rainbow trout in Little Bitterroot Lake to produce a trophy fishery. Continue hybrid trout hatchery on Ashley Lake to increase abundance.
		Yellow perch	Wild	General	Provide angling harvest opportunity
Echo Lake, Lake Blaine	695 acres	Kokanee	Hatchery/ Wild	Put-Grow-Take	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to optimize angler catch rate.
	382 acres	Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to optimize angler catch rate and assess stocking success.

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Continued on next page		Largemouth bass	Hatchery	Special Regulations	Provide angling harvest opportunity. Maintain bass regulations on Echo Lake to protect spawning fish and an abundant bass population.
		Yellow perch, Northern pike	Wild	General	Provide angling harvest opportunity
Small Valley Floor lakes	Each less than 350 acres	Largemouth bass, Yellow perch, Northern pike	Wild	General	Provide angling harvest opportunity.
		Westslope cutthroat trout, Rainbow trout, Brook trout, Grayling	Hatchery/Wild	General/Put-Grow-Take	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to optimize angler catch rate. Complete EA to assess feasibility of stocking brook trout in selected closed basin lakes for recreational fishery.
Small mountain lakes	Each less than 350 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout, Rainbow trout, Brook trout, Grayling	Hatchery/Wild	Put-Grow-Take/General	Evaluate stocking rates to provide a range of fish sizes and catch rates.
Family Fishing Ponds - Pine Grove, Shady Lane, Dry Bridge, Buffalohead	Each less than 5 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout, Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put- Take/ Family Fishing	Provide angling harvest opportunity for youths and families emphasizing high catch rates and convenient access to urban areas.
Flathead Lake	123,000 acres	Bull trout	Wild	Conservation	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout.
		Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/ Special regulations	Eliminate harvest and maintain or expand populations for conservation and catch and release cutthroat angling.



Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Continued on next page		Lake whitefish, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Lake trout, Rainbow trout	Wild	General/suppression	Provide angling harvest opportunity to reduce numbers to help meet native species goals. Coordinate with CSKT on lake trout management.
Lake Mary Ronan, Hubbart Reservoir	1513 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout, Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to improve angler catch rate.
	480 acres	Kokanee	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take/ Special Regulations	Evaluate stocking and/or harvest limits to optimize size of fish and angler catch rate. Maintain wild brood population in Lake Mary Ronan to provide kokanee for MT waters.
		Yellow perch	Wild	General	Provide angling harvest opportunity and reduce impacts on other game fish.

